

FLEMING, ARIZONA (1884-1976). Arizona Fleming, black civil-rights activist, was born on March 23, 1884, in Richmond, Texas, the daughter of Beauregard (Bully) and Laura Fleming. She attended segregated schools through the twelfth grade, then entered Guadalupe College, an all-black school in Seguin. After college she worked for four years as a bookkeeper for Seagul Laundry in Houston, then later returned to Richmond and became a leading seamstress in the county. Little is known of her personal life. Some unverified sources suggest that she married F. A. Hicks on October 21, 1903, and Robert Simmons on January 10, 1912. In 1927 she and several others founded the Fort Bend Fraternal Undertaking Company in Richmond; Fleming served as secretary and manager. During the Great Depression^{qv} she received financial assistance from her uncle, C. H. D. Fleming of Beaumont, who helped her establish a good credit rating. After several years with the undertaking company, Fleming rose to the position of sole proprietor. She also eventually owned her own house. In the early 1950s she became involved in reestablishing the African-American vote in Fort Bend County.

After the Civil War^{qv} the balance of political power shifted in the county. In 1870 the census reported 5,510 blacks and 2,007 whites in Fort Bend County. During Reconstruction^{qv} African Americans^{qv} could vote and hold office. Black officeholders generally were Republican freedmen. In 1886 local whites formed the Young Men's Democratic Club of Fort Bend County, and three years later they changed the name to the Jay Bird Democratic Association. The group soon controlled who could nominate and run in the Democratic primaries. Texas was a state dominated by the Democratic party^{qv} and the Jay Bird Democratic primaries determined who won the county elections. African Americans, Hispanics, and Jews were excluded from the political process.

In 1950 Willie Melton, a prosperous black farmer from the Kendleton area, sought to participate in the Fort Bend County Democratic primaries. A black victory there might also bring the end of white domination in neighboring counties. Melton had William J. Durham,^{qv} an attorney for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People,^{qv} inform the Jay Birds that blacks in the county wanted to vote in their primaries. He cited violations of rights on account of race or color in applicable federal statutes. The Jay Birds responded that they were a private club and could hold private primaries. Melton gathered a group of supporters that included Arizona Fleming, who became an ardent worker. Her name regularly appeared in the records of civil

rights efforts to end local voter discrimination. Melton asked Attorney General Marion Price Daniel, Sr.,^{qv} whether they could take legal action against the Jay Birds. The assistant attorney general responded, declining involvement in the matter. Next, Melton, on the advice of J. Edwin Smith of the Houston firm of Allen, Smith, Neal and Lehmann, sought people to attach their names as plaintiffs in a legal action. Fears of retribution made the search more difficult until several people over age sixty agreed to step forth. One was John Terry, age seventy-seven, of Beasley, who remarked, "I am an old man, use my name, they can no longer hurt me." Terry's name headed a petition filed against A. J. Adams, president, Jay Bird Democratic Association, and other officers. Wealthy black Houstonians, church groups, and the NAACP assisted in court costs, but Melton and Fleming bore much of the financial burden.

On May 1, 1950, the United States District Court for the Southern District ruled in favor of Melton's group. The Fort Bend Civic Club was organized to get out the black vote in the upcoming elections; Melton was president and Fleming, secretary. They went house to house, encouraging African Americans to vote. Of 550 eligible black voters in the county, 400 voted. Though many were fearful of retribution, the sheriff reported no incidents at the polls. The Jay Birds then appealed the decision, and won on January 11, 1952. Melton now proposed taking their case to the United States Supreme Court. The Fort Bend Civic Club solicited funds from the Fort Bend black churches and sponsored a Freedom Ball fund-raiser. Black business leaders in Houston, Dallas, and other towns contributed. The club raised some \$6,000. Melton and Fleming were the only African Americans to attend the Supreme Court session. The high court on May 4, 1953, ruled in favor of the appellants in the case *John Terry et al., Petitioners, v. A. J. Adams, et al., Repentant*. The work of Melton, Fleming, and others had firmly secured for Fort Bend County blacks the right to vote.

During the campaign to obtain the vote for African Americans in Fort Bend County, Arizona Fleming made substantial financial and emotional contributions to the cause. It was said that her personal finances were depleted in the fight and that she died penniless. However, she said "I'd do it all over again." She died on January 18, 1976, in Richmond and was buried in the Mount Carmel Baptist Church cemetery. In 1994 the Fort Bend Independent School District opened the Arizona Fleming Elementary School in the Providence subdivision located off State Highway 6 South in Houston. *See also* CIVIL-RIGHTS MOVEMENT.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: *Fort Bend Sun*, June 28, 1994. Neal Tannahill, *Texas Government Policy and Politics* (1993). *Texas Coaster*, December 20, 1951. Pauline Yelderman, *The Jay Bird Democratic Association of Fort Bend County* (Waco: Texian Press, 1979).

Bonni C. Hayes

Recommended citation:

"FLEMING, ARIZONA." The Handbook of Texas Online.
<<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/FF/fflmw.html>> [Accessed
Tue Nov 4 7:55:49 US/Central 2003].

The *Handbook of Texas Online* is a joint project of The General Libraries at the University of Texas at Austin (<http://www.lib.utexas.edu>) and the Texas State Historical Association (<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu>).

Copyright ©, The Texas State Historical Association, 1997-2002

Last Updated: July 23, 2002

Comments to: comments.tsha@lib.utexas.edu